

Metropolitan Opera House  
1423 Broadway  
New York  
New York County  
New York

HABS No. NY-5486

HABS  
NY,  
31-NEYO,  
79-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
801 19th Street N. W.  
Washington, D. C. 20006

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NY-5486

## METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE

HABS

NY,

31-NEYO,

79-

Address: 1423 Broadway, between West 39th and West 40th Streets,  
New York, New York County, New York.

Present Owner: The building has been demolished, but the Metropolitan  
Opera Association, Inc., still owns the site.

Statement of  
Significance: The Metropolitan Opera House was the home of the  
Metropolitan Opera Company from 1883 until 1966 and dur-  
ing those eighty-three years played an important role  
in operatic tradition. Although the building, designed  
by J. Cleveland Cady, did not have a particularly dis-  
tinguished exterior, its interior placed it among the  
great opera houses of the world.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description of the  
property: The building occupied Lot 1 in Block 815.

<u>Date</u>	<u>Grantor</u>	<u>Grantee</u>
4/12/1881 Liber 159 <sup>4</sup> , page 185.	Coggill Julia M. widow of Coggill Frederick W.	The Metropolitan Opera Company
4/12/1881 Liber 159 <sup>4</sup> , page 188.	Sturges Susan widow of Sturges Thomas T.	The Metropolitan Opera Company
4/12/1881 Liber 159 <sup>4</sup> , page 190.	Johnson Charles Rebecca	The Metropolitan Opera Company
4/12/1881 Liber 159 <sup>4</sup> , page 192.	McGaw John A. (Exrs. & Trus. of) Woodbury Freeman P. Charles H. Dickens Allen C. (Trustees)	The Metropolitan Opera Company
4/12/1881 Liber 159 <sup>4</sup> , page 194.	Hopper Harriet J. George F.	The Metropolitan Opera Company

4/12/1881 Liber 1594, page 197.	Crook Andrew Amelia	The Metropolitan Opera Company
4/12/1881 Liber 1594, page 199.	Monaghan Roger Ann	The Metropolitan Opera Company
6/7/1884 Liber 1820, page 16.	Metropolitan Opera House Company of New York Limited	The Metropolitan Improvement Company
3/14/1893 Liber 17, page 444.	Thomson David (Ref.) Bowery Savings Bank (Plaintiff) -against- Metropolitan Opera House Company of New York et al (Defendents)	Metropolitan Opera & Real Estate Company
6/28/1940 Liber 4067, page 98.	Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Co.	Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc.

2. Date of erection: The first performance in the building was held on October 22, 1883.
3. Architect: J. Cleveland Cady (1838-1919).
4. Builder, suppliers: The interior decoration was under the direction of E. P. Treadwell of Boston.
5. Original plans and construction. The opera house was built as a result of the great social demand for boxes which could not be met at the old Academy of Music. The following articles provide lengthy, detailed descriptions of the building at the time of its opening:

"The New Opera House," The New-York Times, October 23, 1883,  
p. 1.

Schuyler, Montgomery. "The Metropolitan Opera-House,"  
Harper's New Monthly Magazine, LXVII (November, 1883),  
877-889.

Van Rensselaer, M. G. "The Metropolitan Opera-House, New York,"  
The American Architect and Building News, XV (February 16,  
1884), 76-77, 86-89.

6. Alterations and additions: The interior of the opera house was severely damaged by fire on August 27, 1892. In the rebuilding several major improvements were made including the installation of electric lights and new red and gold silk hangings, and the removal of the baignoire boxes, which were replaced by 350 orchestra circle seats and improved storage space.

In 1903 the interior underwent a major redecoration. Carrere & Hastings supervised changes to the proscenium arch and added a new smoking room and foyer at the grand tier level. New seats were installed in the auditorium and new terrazzo floor laid. W. and J. Sloane supplied new silks and carpets. The color scheme was changed to deep red and gold. The stage was remodeled in order to handle more scenery by Carl Lauten & Clagen of Munich.

In November, 1905, a new curtain of figured gold damask was installed, and in 1906 the first rows of orchestra seats were removed. For the 1908-9 season two electric elevators to the family circle level were put into operation, and new folding orchestra chairs and orchestra pit lowering apparatus installed. Soon after, a rehearsal room was built at the 40th Street and Seventh Avenue corner of the building and in 1921 another room was built at the southwest corner.

In 1934-35 the building was again renovated. The exterior was sandblasted. On the interior new orchestra seats, an ice water system and new electrical equipment were installed. Terrazzo floors were laid in the outer lobbies and a fireproof asbestos curtain hung.

In 1936 the building received a new roof and a new heating system, and padded seats were installed in the family circle.

In 1940 the porte cocheres were reconstructed and the box office improved. The interior was painted and re-carpeted, and the grand tier boxes were replaced by 144 seats.

The last performance was held on April 16, 1966, and the new opera house at Lincoln Center opened the following September.

7. Important old views: Both the Museum of the City of New York and the New-York Historical Society have old photographs of the exterior of the building.

#### B. Sources of Information

1. Secondary and published sources:

Birkhaire, William H. The Planning and Construction of American Theatres. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1906.

"Competitive Design Prepared for the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, N. Y., Messrs. Potter & Robertson, Architect, New York, N. Y.," The American Architect and Building News, VIII (November 13, 1880), 234-35, plates no. 255.

"\$8-Million is Goal to Save Old Met," The New York Times, April 7, 1966.

"Farewell for a Grand Old Met Will Open a New Era in City's Operatic History," The New York Times, April 15, 1966, p. 43.

"Hartford Puts Up 'Old Met' Surety," The New York Times, August 18, 1966.

"Hearing Coming on Met Reprieve," The New York Times, June 28, 1966.

"Huntington Hartford Offer Wins 5-Day Delay of Met Demolition," The New York Times, August 12, 1966.

Kolodin, Irving. The Metropolitan Opera 1883-1966. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.

"Mayor Supports Saving Old Met," The New York Times, March 24, 1966.

Merkling, Frank; Freeman, John W.; and Fitzgerald, Gerald. The Golden Horseshoe, the Life and Times of the Metropolitan Opera House. New York: The Viking Press, 1965.

"Met Bill Alarms Opera Executive," The New York Times, May 12, 1966.

"The Metropolitan Opera House," The American Architect and Building News, XXVIII (September 10, 1892), 157.

"The New Opera House," The New-York Times, October 23, 1883, p. 1.

"The New Stage of the Metropolitan Opera House," Scientific American, XC (February 6, 1904), 117-118.

Peltzer, Mary Ellis. Behind the Gold Curtain. New York: Farrar Straus and Co., 1950.

Preston, Stuart, ed. Farewell to the Old House. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966.

Schuyler, Montgomery. "The Metropolitan Opera-House," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, LXVII (November, 1883), 877-889.

Stokes, I. N. P. Iconography of Manhattan Island. New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915.

Van Rensselaer, M. G. "The Metropolitan Opera-House, New York," The American Architect and Building News, XV (February 16, 1884), 76-77, 86-89.

2. Likely sources not yet investigated: Archives of the Metropolitan Opera Company.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement

1. Architectural interest and merit: The Metropolitan Opera House was the home of the Metropolitan Opera Company from 1883 to 1966 and during those eighty-three years played an important role in operatic tradition. Although the building, designed by J. Cleveland Cady, did not have a particularly distinguished exterior, its interior placed it among the great opera houses of the world.
2. Condition of fabric: Demolished.

### B. Description of Exterior

1. Number of stories: Two through seven stories.
2. Number of bays: The Broadway facade is eleven bays wide.
3. Over-all dimensions: The following are approximate measurements: Broadway side 205'-0"; Seventh Avenue side, 198'-0"; 39th Street side, 285'-0"; and 40th Street side, 230'-0".
4. Layout, shape: The building is trapezoidal.
5. Wall construction, finish and color: Yellow brick laid up in running bond with brick and terra cotta belt courses.
6. Structural system, framing: Probably iron and/or steel frame.
7. Porches: Stone entrance steps with ornamental metal marquee at entrances on Broadway, West 39th and West 40th Streets.
8. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Triple-arched doors on Broadway, West 39th and West 40th Streets provide major means of public access to house. Various doorways on Seventh Avenue and side streets provide service and freight entrance. Particular high narrow scenery door near north end of Seventh Avenue elevation.

- b. Windows: Round-headed, one-over-one-light double-hung sash in corner office towers. Broadway side: Rectangular casement windows at second floor level with terra cotta surrounds; large triple arched windows over entrance with ornamental fanlights. Third floor windows separated with terra cotta sculptured panels. Side and rear elevations: several sizes of round headed, circular, rectangular and segmental arched windows including two large multi-pane windows on Seventh Avenue elevation.

9. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Flat over most of building; gabled over auditorium and stage; roof gardens over entrances.
- b. Cornice: Terra cotta cornice.

C. Description of Interior

- 1. Floor plans: Rectangular auditorium surrounded on three sides by offices, service rooms, stairways, bars, and restaurant.
- 2. Stairways: Two parallel stairways with open well between go up from Broadway lobby. At northeast and southeast corners of auditorium passageway are stairways with oval runs. Prefabricated metal stairs with cast iron railings.
- 3. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster, painted in plain colors in areas outside of auditorium. Occasional ceiling paintings of cherubs and flowers on stairways and passageways.
- 4. Decorative features and trim: High square proscenium with ornamental plaster frame, lattice sides above broken columns bearing comedy and tragedy masks, scrolls of music, instruments, all garlanded with flowers. Central oval cartouches with elaborate enframement of leaves, topped with comedy and tragedy masks. Three panels to either side containing names of composers; panels separated by oval grilles screened by lyres and ornamented with cherubs playing flutes and holding leafy garlands with drape around grilles, name panels and ornamental musical instruments. Top ornament terminates at sides of proscenium with large masks in an attitude of singing surrounded by floral wreaths. Cove ceiling with modillion cornice. Cove divided into sections decorated with rectangular panels with elaborate enframements of leaves, fruit, scrolls, and musical instruments. Rear section of cove omitted to provide room for family circle seating. Main ceiling surface flat, lattice work centering on large conical crystal chandelier. Ceiling framed with wide ornamental band featuring panels, vegetation and musical instruments. Oval ceiling paintings at front, rear, and sides, elaborate frames topped by masks. Fascia of grand tier boxes formed into bays, decorated with cartouches and leafy gar-

lands. Upper three balconies smooth in curvature, ornamented with leafy swags and cartouches and studded with light fixtures. The second balcony is similar but lacks cartouches and is more delicate in ornament than the upper boxes. Soffit of second balcony ornamented with moldings and floral designs in plaster to correspond to outline of grand tier boxes below. All ornamental plaster finished in gold leaf.

5. Notable hardware: Ceramic drinking fountains with backplash depicting children playing pipes of pan in leafy setting.
6. Lighting: Electrical.
7. Heating: Central steam heat.

D. Site and Surroundings:

1. Orientation: Broadway facade faces East.
2. Outbuilding: Warehouse on West 40th Street west of Seventh Avenue used to store scenery which was transferred to house, scene by scene, and stored on Seventh Avenue sidewalk until ready for use.

Prepared by Diana S. Waite  
Architectural Historian  
August, 1968